

# Artists Abundant at Turtle Mountain Reservation

By Teresa Oe  
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From creating music to recreating history, the Turtle Mountain Reservation is abundant in rich, meaningful artistry. People of the reservation nurture an artistic environment through mentorship and commitment to culture. The following five artists are a sampling of the area's talent.

## Eddie "King" Johnson

Eddie Johnson was raised on the music of the reservation and the popular bush dances of his community. Although he could dance, Johnson preferred making the music. He

started out as an accompanist, chording on the guitar, and soon became skilled with a fiddle.

In the '50s, Johnson tested his talent by auditioning in California. People loved his traditional country music and came to know him by his professional last name, "King." He traveled throughout the country singing and playing with other big names of the era and eventually formed his own band, Country Knights.

Now at age 72, Johnson still enjoys performing, especially with his son, Brian, and grandson, Wyatt. He also has taken up teaching, sharing his fiddle and guitar experience with students at Turtle Mountain Community College. His peers commonly approach him saying, "You've got to slow down, Ed." His response: "Slow down to do what?"

Through the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship program of the North Dakota Council on the Arts, Johnson also works one-on-one with students aspiring to grow their musical repertoires. Craig Lunday was his apprentice from July to December.

Prior to taking Johnson's classes, Lunday had never played fiddle. With a natural talent and Johnson's careful

guidance, his skill has grown significantly in less than two years. He plans to record an album, but says his greatest joy is what he's gained for his family. "I can now pass this on to my children, thanks to Eddie."

Johnson also mentored Rachael Morin from Dunseith, helping her learn to play fiddle in high school. She now is a professional musician and has released her first CD, *Fiddling My Way*. The two have a special bond in that they share similar artistic styles. "She plays just like me," Johnson says. "She's my protégé."

## Cynthia Schumaier-Jelleberg

Cynthia Schumaier-Jelleberg also shares her talents with others as a fine arts instructor at Turtle Mountain Community College. She specializes in visual-based arts and especially enjoys painting.

It wasn't until college that Jelleberg fully discovered her love for art. In high school, she was a math-and-science girl. It was actually her science teacher, Don Roedocker, who made her promise to take a college art course. "He saw something in me that I didn't see," Jelleberg says. "Out of sheer guilt, I signed up."

The rest is history. Just last year, Jelleberg received a Governor's Award for the Arts in recognition of her outstanding contributions to arts education in North Dakota.

Jelleberg was nominated by her students, who make her very proud. She says they have won art awards at the national American Indian Higher Education Consortium competitions almost every year. Also, two of her students' artwork was selected for print in a calendar sponsored by the American Indian College Fund. Jelleberg says, "I was most proud of a group of students who created a beautiful 'painted pony' for a North Dakota Easter Seals benefit auction that raised \$4,000."

## Dan Jerome

Dan Jerome brings history to life by researching Native American artifacts and then recreating them. He is most well-known for his skill as a flute-maker.



Dan Jerome plays one of the wooden flutes he built from scratch. He has created more than 370 flutes. North Dakota Council on the Arts/Troyd Geist photo

"I've made more than 370 flutes," Jerome says, "and I've given more than 250 of them away to many people in many nations. I don't sell them, but keep some to exhibit."

For as long as he's made the wooden flutes, about 20 years, he has also played them. As he travels to schools, colleges and festivals, his audience not only sees his craftsmanship, but also hears the superior sound of the carefully crafted flutes.

Jerome has researched and crafted a number of other items related to his Chippewa and Métis culture as well, including drums, snowshoes, dogsleds and Red River carts.

He also authored a book titled, *The Trail of Misgivings: A Scourging Journey*. It is a study of the formal education of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa from 1800-2006.

Jerome's talent in the arts is equally matched by his leadership abilities. He worked in education for 32 years and was the first Native American elected to the North Dakota State Senate in 1990.

## Mekinok (Debbie) Gourneau

"Storytelling is a survival art. It teaches us to live in the right way," says Mekinok (Debbie) Gourneau, a storyteller within the reservation and beyond. She conveys traditions and values via the stories of her Chippewa heritage.

Gourneau became skilled at storytelling foremost by listening to her elders. Through the years, she's gained much practice as a teacher, mother of three and grandmother of 10. In addition, she works with chaplains, domestic shelters and women's groups to bring her messages to other areas of the state.

Storytelling is a major component of the many ceremonies that are a cultural and spiritual staple on the reservation. To celebrate the seasons, rites of life and special events, Gourneau and others tell stories through song.

The stories center on ancestors and spirituality, with overriding messages like, "keep everything as natural as possible" and "never take more than what you need."

In addition to storytelling, Gourneau also is a textile artist, making shawls and other traditional dress for herself, her family and others in the community.



Mekinok (Debbie) Gourneau is one of the many artists of the Turtle Mountain Reservation and is most known for her storytelling. Many of her stories include elements of nature. The woods of the area provide a perfect backdrop. North Dakota Council on the Arts/Troyd Geist photo

## Bennett Brien

During his last year of college at the University of North Dakota, Bennett Brien decided to take a sculpture class.

The professor, Stan Johnson, asked each student to complete one small, medium and life-size project. Throughout the entire semester and with a lot of overtime, Brien completed only the small sculpture. It was so good, however, that his teacher gave him an "A" in the class.

He enrolled again the next semester and began work on the metal buffalo that now adorns the North Dakota Capitol grounds, along with another of Brien's sculptures, a horse named Cortez. His works are also displayed at other locations in Bismarck, Grand Forks and Crookston, Minnesota.

Brien is now a full-time artist and also teaches at Turtle Mountain Community College. His current and challenging project is that of two sign-like nature sculptures that will mark each end of the scenic byway on Highway 43 north of Belcourt.

Brien has been instrumental in the recent development of the Turtle Mountain Tribal Arts Association. "The Association is for all arts," he says, explaining that it will help market and educate people about the art that exists on the reservation.



Bennett Brien created this sculpture for the University of Minnesota, Crookston. It was unveiled in a special ceremony in 2003 and now is displayed in the Youngquist Prairie Garden adjacent to the Student Center. John C. Zak, University of Minnesota, Crookston photo

Cynthia Schumaier-Jelleberg received a Governor's Award for the Arts, sponsored by the Office of the Governor and the North Dakota Council on the Arts. Bennett Brien has been on the Artist Roster for the NDCA Artist-In-Residence program and was funded for residency work in several North Dakota schools. Eddie Johnson, Debbie Gourneau and Dan Jerome have all been masters in the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship program of the NDCA, and the NDCA has helped fund Turtle Mountain Community College through its Special Projects grants.

For more information about the NDCA and its programs that support communities across the state, call 701-328-7590 or visit [www.nd.gov/arts](http://www.nd.gov/arts).